

# The Primary Program for All Children

*Classrooms grounded in best-practice education, and modified to be responsive to students' differences, benefit virtually all students. Differentiation addresses the needs of struggling and advanced learners. It addresses the needs of students for whom English is a second language and students who have strong learning style preferences. It addresses gender differences and cultural differences. It pays homage to the truth that we are not born to become replicas of one another.*

Tomlinson, 1999

**T**he primary program responds to the diversity of learners by helping children to understand, respect, and appreciate individual differences. The teacher fosters the belief that all individuals have strengths to share and things to learn from others' uniqueness.

The early childhood setting may be the first place in which children realize how they are like other children and how they are different from others. Children seem to accept these differences and similarities and to know they can succeed when they experience respect and a sense of purpose. This attitude of acceptance without competition fosters growth in ALL. It helps children to realize the benefits of appreciating each other, focusing on how they can work together to find solutions, finish projects, and set and complete goals. Although external differences among people may be obvious, the need for safety, respect, caring, and equal opportunity for learning and growth are universal. By creating environments in which unique abilities and contributions are recognized and celebrated, the heritage, gender, culture and talents of all members are respected.

The primary program is designed to be child-centered and to recognize, value, and successfully accommodate the diversity of individual learners, including children of all ability levels. "The research evidence on these points is very strong; when children of all ability (or achievement) levels learn collaboratively, not only do those of lower and medium ability benefit substantially, but so do those of higher ability" (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). This encompasses boys and girls who are gifted/talented and those identified as having special needs and those with challenging behaviors.

Using differentiated instruction, primary program teachers broaden classroom activities, objectives, and experiences to meet each child's social-emotional and academic needs. "In differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's. The curriculum guide is a teacher source book that increases the number of learning opportunities available, rather than mandating identical experiences for each child" (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). This autonomous approach to learning in the early childhood setting allows all children the opportunity to reach their potentials without the constraints of a narrow curriculum.

In the end, it is not standardization that makes a classroom work. It is a deep respect for the identity of the individual. A teacher in a differentiated classroom:

- Respects the learning level of each student
- Expects all students to grow, and supports their continual growth
- Offers all students the opportunity to explore essential understandings and skills at degrees of difficulty that escalate consistently as learners develop understanding and skill
- Offers all students tasks that look—and are—equally interesting, equally important, and equally engaging.

A framework needs to be in place that addresses the gender, culture, ability level, language and learning style. Every child who comes through the door of any classroom or center is entitled to support and guidance from adults who believe in developing that child's potential. There are characteristics that all children should expect from the teaching and learning in a healthy classroom. This begins when a teacher:

- Appreciates each child as an individual
- Remembers to teach the whole child, considering individual, physical, social and emotional needs
- Continues to develop expertise
- Links students and ideas
- Strives for joyful learning
- Offers high expectations and many opportunities for scaffolding
- Helps students make their own sense of ideas
- Shares the teaching with students
- Strives clearly for student independence
- Uses positive energy and humor
- Knows that discipline is more covert than overt (Tomlinson, 1999)

Educators can then plan for the child whose needs extend beyond the scope of daily practices.

“Young children with special needs are a tremendously diverse group...Two certain facts about children with special needs are *they are all children and they all have unique needs*. First, because children with special needs are children, they have needs shared by all children. These include physical needs for shelter, rest and nourishment and psychological needs to be nurtured, safe and accepted. Second, children with (special needs) have needs that are NOT shared by all other children. They need environments that are specifically organized and adjusted...they need professionals who are competent in meeting the general needs of young children...who value working cooperatively with families to meet family needs and to help families promote their child's development” (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992).

The teacher can help children realize their areas of giftedness and can nurture those gifts. Children can also be taught to recognize the giftedness/uniqueness of others and not to be threatened by differences. When all children's gifts are nurtured, when strengths and differences are accepted and celebrated, when learning with and leaning upon others helps individuals and the group to grow, then gender, cultural and ability differences are addressed naturally. Teachers can expect all children to show progress toward a set of

standards. When all teachers in every setting are meeting children's needs, progress is continual and all children learn.

## References

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- Bredekamp, S. & Rosegrant, T. (1992). *Reaching potentials: Appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, p. 95.
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